

Journalistic Ethics

The vast majority of the media make every effort to perform their duties ethically and with a sense of fairness. Understanding the profession can assist a Crisis Communication Team in understanding the parameters of what the media has the right to report. Conversely, these guidelines give insight in establishing ground rules and deciding if a correction is justified.

The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) is a broad-based journalism organization with 9,000 members in the United States. It has adopted an extensive and detailed Code of Ethics for its members and the profession at large. According to the SPJ, the code, “instructs journalists to seek truth and report it, minimize harm, act independently and be accountable.” Within this framework, SPJ outlines the following best practices for its members to abide:

- Test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error. Deliberate distortion is never permissible.
- Diligently seek out subjects of news stories to give them the opportunity to respond to allegations of wrongdoing.
- Make certain that headlines, news teases and promotional material, photos, video, audio graphics, sound bites and quotations do not misrepresent. They should not oversimplify or highlight incidents out of context.
- Never distort the content of news photos or videos.
- Image enhancement for technical clarity is always permissible.
- Always label montages and photo illustrations.
- Recognize a special obligation to ensure that the public’s business is conducted in the open and that government records are open to inspection.
- Show compassion for those that may be affected adversely by news coverage.
- Use special sensitivity when dealing with children and inexperienced sources or subjects.
- Be sensitive when seeking or using interviews or photographs of those affected by tragedy or grief.
- Recognize that gathering and reporting information may cause harm or discomfort.
- Pursuit of news is not a license for arrogance.
- Clarify and explain news coverage and invite dialogue with the public over journalistic conduct.
- Encourage the public to voice grievances against the news media.
- Admit mistakes and correct them promptly.

More information from the Society of Professional Journalists is available at:
www.spj.org/ethics_code.asp

Source: *Jane’s Crisis Communications Handbook*